

An overview of Asian palaeoart of the Pleistocene

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Abstract: *This critical assessment of the present state of secure knowledge of Pleistocene palaeoart in the continent of Asia considers both the proven occurrences from five countries, and proposed further finds that are of questionable status. The nature and diversity of the available pan-continental evidence is discussed. This survey indicates firstly that, in comparison especially to Europe, this subject has been severely neglected; and secondly, that the known geographical distribution and the paucity of credible instances are the result of such factors as the intensity of research activities and taphonomic factors. The only reasonably informative data derives from a very few areas where research has been focused, and the nature of the Pleistocene finds illustrates significant taphonomic bias –as is also the case in the other continents.*

In the subject of Pleistocene art, the tail has been wagging the dog for over a century –ever since the concept of a Diluvian rock art was grudgingly accepted after decades of resistance to it. The non-European corpus of such rock art is far greater than that of Europe, which is not surprising: Europe is merely a relatively small appendage of Asia. But while there have been more books, academic and non-academic articles about the Pleistocene art of Europe than there are actually rock art motifs and portable art objects known from this area, there has been so far only one single paper on the subject of pan-continental early palaeoart of Asia (Bednarik 1994). This demonstrates not only an incredible balance in the coverage of the topic, that same imbalance is manifestly evident also in Africa and Australia. All three continents should be expected to contain significant occurrences of Ice Age palaeoart, yet there is not a single publication summarising such material from Africa, and the only papers attempting this for both Asia and Australia are by one author. This is an incredible scenario, which is responsible for the massive misinformation that exists about the generic subject, over a century after the existence of Pleistocene art was generally accepted.

Any review of the known corpus of rock art and mobiliary art from Asia that can credibly be attributed to the Pleistocene reflects this neglect. The quantity of this material currently available resembles the extremely poor resolution of the continent's palaeoanthropological record. Since the rise of African palaeo-anthropology –which had itself been severely neglected in favour of Europe, and as a result of the Piltdown fraud– in the middle of the 20th century, that of Asia has been consistently neglected, and today finds such as the Flores specimens demonstrate vividly how inadequate our understanding of hominin evolution in Asia is. Precisely the same applies in palaeoart, and for much the same reason. But while palaeoanthropology has to some extent managed to escape the gravitational pull of Europe, that revolution has yet to occur in palaeoart research, a field that as a consequence still remains in its infancy.

The report of the world's earliest known rock art from two central Indian sites (Bednarik *et al.* 2005) does not indicate that this is where this form of symbolic

expression began. It merely illustrates that our knowledge of the subject still comprises mainly lacunae, and that any interpretations based on the available record must necessarily be premature. The wide distribution of the few reported occurrences across this vast continent confirms the precarious state of our knowledge. Clearly palaeoart has been created in Asia since Lower Palaeolithic times, but even its Upper Palaeolithic component is entirely inadequate to draw any justified conclusions. Apart from the Siberian corpus of mobiliary palaeoart, we have at present almost no other representatives even from the final part of the Pleistocene. This stands in stark contrast to both Europe and Australia, although in the latter continent it also remains almost entirely ignored.

Siberia

The reason for the ready acceptance of a series of portable palaeoart from central Siberia is almost certainly the fact that it comprises materials that are readily relatable to the central and western European body of the Final Pleistocene, such as anthropomorphous and zoomorphic sculptures and engraved plaques. The best-known are the thirty-three human-like figurines from Mal'ta and Buret' (Fig. 1), mostly because they are often considered to be related to the female figurines especially of the Gravettian, reported from western and central Europe as well as from Russia and Ukraine. However, the Siberian figurines differ in many aspects from those in Europe: few provide adequate indications of gender to define them as female; close to half show facial details (typically lacking in the European sample); some appear to be clothed, which is not the case with the European figurines; they are on average significantly smaller than the typical western examples; and the majority show indications of having been worn suspended on a string, whereas most of those from Europe would be too large to have been pendants. Moreover, the Siberian sample is considerably younger, the main corpus, from Mal'ta being in the order of 15,000 years old. Apart from Buret' No. 5 (steatite) and a clay figurine from Maininskaya, the entire Siberian sample is of mammoth ivory. It is questionable that these pendants are of a tradition that had some cultural connections with the so-called Venus figurines of Russia/Ukraine, central and western Europe.



Fig. 1. Figurines from Mal'ta, central Siberia.



Fig. 2. The Buret' figurines Nos 3 and 4, central Siberia.

The same applies to all other forms of mobiliary palaeoart from these sites. Few if any have recognisable counterparts in Europe. The thirteen flying-bird pendants from Mal'ta plus one specimen from Buret' are absent in European Palaeolithic art, as are the other three bird pendants, and the five nail-shaped pins of various further, apparently decorative items. Four sites have provided perforated disc beads (Afontova Gora II, Krasnyi Yar, Buret' and Mal'ta) and perforated animal teeth, presumably also used as beads, have been reported from Verkholsenskaya Gora and Afontova Gora II. Incised engravings on portable objects are usually geometric, as on the centrally perforated Mal'ta ivory plaque (Fig. 2), on the Oshurkovo pendant and incised bone, two of the circular discs from Afontova Gora II, another circular disc from Afontova Gora III (Fig. 3), and four intricately decorated objects from the Irkutsk Hospital or Voennyi site.

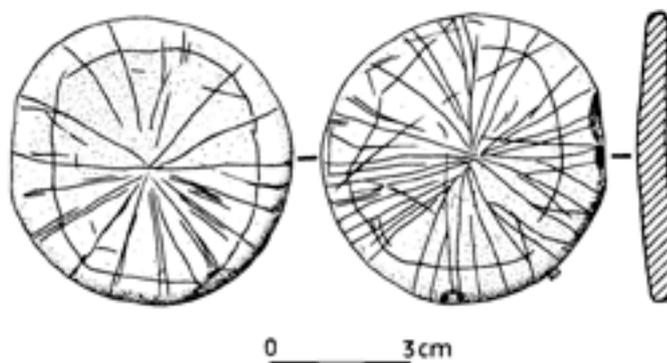


Fig. 3. The engraved circular disc from Afontova Gora III, Siberia.

Altogether, more than one hundred palaeoart or art-like finds have been reported from Siberia, including from five sites on the Angara / Belaya river (Buret', Krasnyi

Yar, Ust'-Kova and Verkholskaya Gora), eight on the upper Yenisey (Afontova Gora II, Afontova Gora III, Maininskaya, Dvouglaзка Cave, Tachtik, Kokorevo, Novosselovo and Atchinskaya), two sites on the upper Ob river (Ust'-Kanskaya and Denissova Cave), two from south of Lake Baikal (Oshurkovo and Tolbaga), one on the Irtysh River (Cherno-Ozer'e), and another from the mouth of the Indigirka river (Berelekh). Of particular interest is the animal head carved on a projection of a second vertebra of a woolly rhinoceros from Tolbaga (Fig. 4). If Abramova (1990) is right that it relates to the older of the two dates secured from the site, 34,860 ± 2100 BP, it would be one of the oldest naturalistic sculptures known in the world, exceeded in age perhaps only by the recently found Hohle Fels female figurine (Conard 2009) and the Lower Palerolithic "proto-figurines". Only two apparently figurative two-dimensional images are known from the Pleistocene of all Asia: the "mammoth" engravings found on a juvenile mammoth tusk from Berelekh and on a perforated ivory plaque from Mal'ta (Fig. 5). Of interest are also the stone and bone beads from Strashnaya Cave (Tolbor) and the perforated ostrich eggshell from Podzvonkaya, noting the finds of eggshell beads elsewhere in Asia (Mongolia and India). Some of these Siberian palaeoart finds are thought to be up to 40 ka old, bearing in mind that MP and UP traditions co-existed in parts of Siberia for a long time (43–27 ka BP), as did robust and gracile *Homo sapiens* forms. The decorated stone pendants from Khotyk are considered younger, between 25 and 30 ka (Volkov & Lbova 2009).

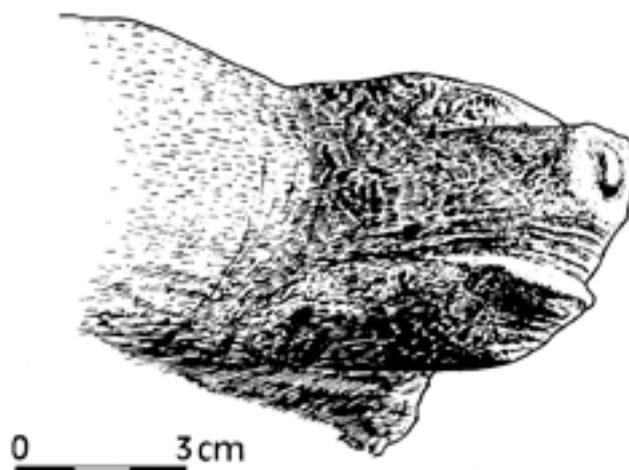


Fig. 4. Animal head carved on a woolly rhinoceros vertebra, Tolbaga, south of Lake Baikal.

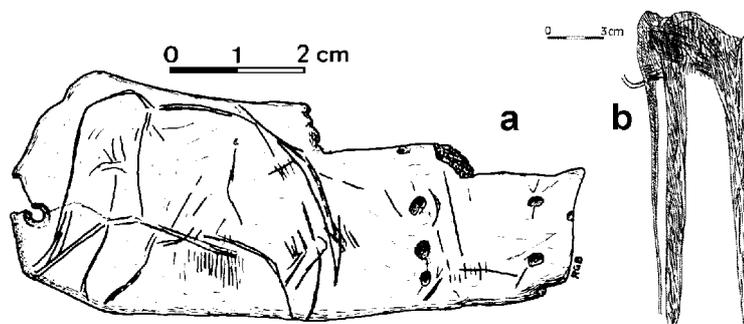


Fig. 5. Presumed mammoth depictions from Siberia: a. Mal'ta; b. Berelekh.

There have been a few claims for Pleistocene rock art from Siberia, particularly those by Okladnikov and colleagues (Okladnikov 1959, 1977: Figs 56, 57; Okladnikov & Saporoshskaya 1959) concerning the sites Shishkino and Tal'ma. I have investigated these claims and the few painted zoomorphs in question are undoubtedly of the late Holocene (Bednarik & Devlet 1992). Many of the accompanying engraved figures were made with metal tools, and the painted motifs, fully exposed to precipitation on rapidly eroding sandstone, would not survive beyond a few millennia at the most. Even the claimed Pleistocene age of the paintings of two caves, Kapova and Ignatiev Caves, in the Ural Mountains –the watershed between Asia and Europe– needs to be reconsidered, now that one of the latter has been dated to the early Holocene (Bednarik 1993a; Steelman *et al.* 2002).

China

Only one specimen of intricately produced palaeoart has so far been reported from China, the engraved deer antler fragment from Longgu Cave, Hebei Province (Bednarik 1992). It is directly dated to $13,065 \pm 270$ years BP by AMS, which confirms a similar date obtained from charcoal found in the same layer. The object bears three discrete geometric patterns, very competently engraved (Fig. 6): one forms a multiple guilloche within a figure-eight enclosure; the other comprises four sets of six parallel wave lines; while the third consists of parallel and zigzag lines enclosing two elongate panels of oblique cross hatching. The object was thickly coated with a brilliant red pigment, presumably haematite.

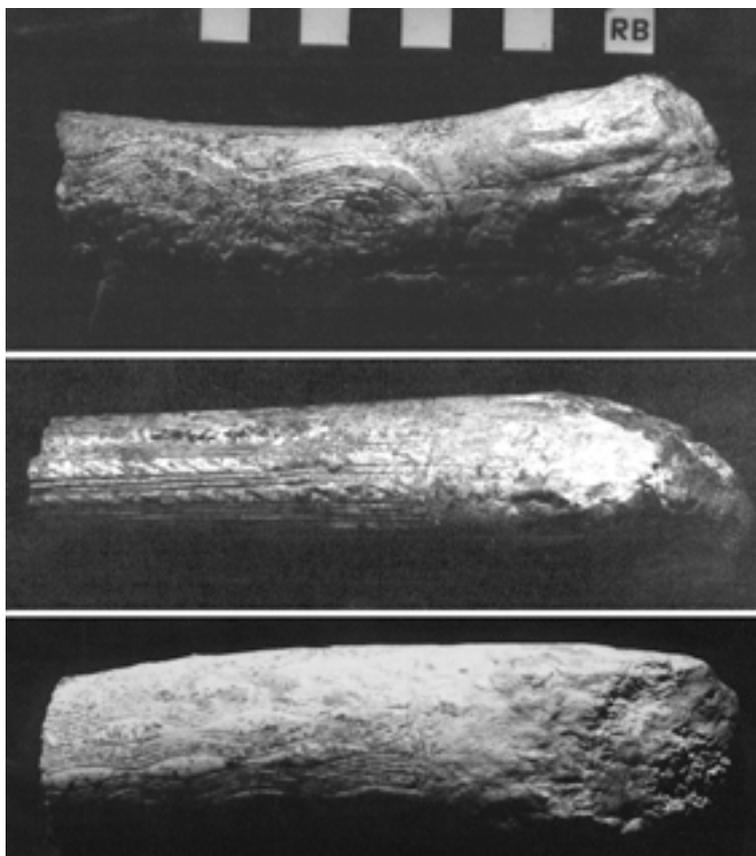


Fig. 6. Three views of the engraved deer antler from Longgu Cave, China.

There are simpler examples of palaeoart known from China. They include over 120 perforated objects from the Upper Palaeolithic of the Zhoukoudian Upper Cave. These consist of deer and fox teeth, shells, fish vertebrae, perforated pebbles, and five polished tubular sections made from long bones of a large bird species, with engraved parallel cut marks numbering from one to five. The latter may have been worn as bracelets. Minor traces of haematite occur on some of these objects, and the site has yielded numerous haematite or ochre fragments as well as human interments, all dating from the last ten millennia of the Pleistocene (Bednarik & You 1991). Disc beads made from ostrich eggshell found in the Gobi Desert are attributed to the final Pleistocene industry exemplified at Shabarak-usu.

Significantly earlier is a 6-cm fragment of a stone disc with central perforation that has broken in half, from the Shiyu site in Shanxi Province. It is from a technocomplex combining Middle and Upper Palaeolithic elements, ranging from 32,000 to 28,000 years BP (Bednarik & You 1991). The same site has also yielded about 600 bone fragments with extensive marking, claimed to be engraved. However, examination of this collection attributed all markings to taphonomic factors of four types. Similarly, none the many claims for Pleistocene rock art made in China (and in one case even for Tertiary rock art!) has so far been verified, but those that have been checked have been rejected. A similar claim made in South Korea, of both rock art and portable art of the Pleistocene (Sohn Pow-Key 1974, 1981) probably falls into the same category, but has not been checked.

Japan

Early palaeoart remains very scarce in Japan, and credible finds remain limited to the very final Pleistocene and to stone materials. The only examples are a drilled stone disc from the Debari site, Mie Prefecture; a polished triangular stone object from the Deguchi Kane-zuka site, Chiba Prefecture (Okamura 1992); and the engraved pebbles from Kamikuroiwa rockshelter, Ehime Prefecture. The latter, called kokeshi, are natural pebbles with engraved patterns interpreted as depicting breasts and skirts (Fig. 7). They are from the Incipient Jomon tradition and over 12,000 years old (Aikens and Higuchi 1982).

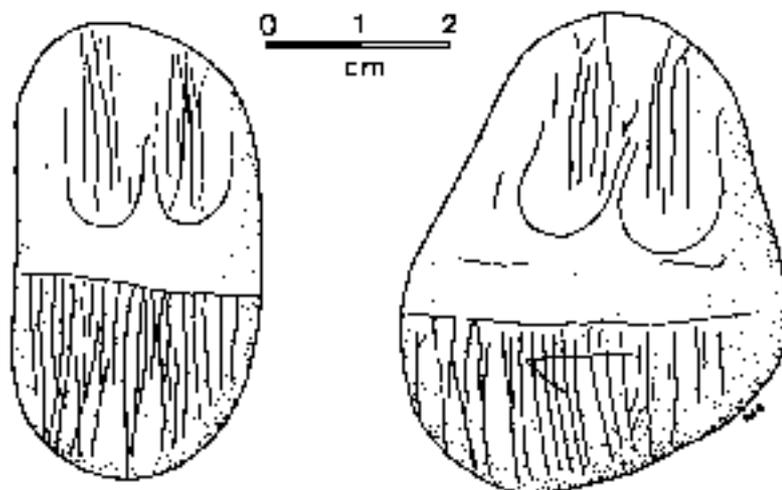


Fig. 7. Two engraved pebbles from Kamikuroiwa rockshelter, Japan.

India

The search for Palaeolithic art has also been guided in India by the western European paradigm of how such evidence should be manifested. For instance researchers such as V. S. Wakankar sought to find it in "dynamic" human figures and zoomorphs, and an Upper Palaeolithic bone object from Lohanda Nala was described as a female figurine or "mother goddess" (Misra 1977). My examination of this object revealed a damaged bone harpoon, i.e. a utilitarian rather than symbolic artefact. With such preoccupations, guided by the European model, it is not surprising that Pleistocene rock art remained elusive until I proposed a Lower Palaeolithic antiquity for eleven petroglyphs in Auditorium Cave, the central site of the vast Bhimbetka rock art complex (Bednarik 1993b). Two of them, a cupule and a pecked meandering line, had been excavated from the upper part of an Acheulian deposit.

My proposal was highly audacious at that time, bearing in mind that the replacement or "African Eve" hypothesis was in rapid ascent then and contemplation of any pre-Upper Palaeolithic evidence of symboling ability was virtually unacceptable. There can be little doubt that my claim would have been at best ignored, at worst ridiculed, but it soon prompted a similar proposition concerning the large cupule site of Daraki-Chattan cave, also in central India (Kumar 1996). At that site, another quartzite cave in extremely hard rock, it became obvious that the entrance parts of the cupule panels had become exfoliated through insolation, and that the detached tabular slabs should lie buried in the floor sediments. G. Kumar commenced an excavation and soon began to detect in the strata slab fragments bearing cupules. In view of the contentious claims being made, an international committee was formed to supervise the EIP (Early Indian Petroglyphs) Project, and the excavation was conducted under its control and that of the Archaeological Survey of India. In all, 29 exfoliated cupules were excavated at the cave entrance, as well as one in situ cupule and a block with two linear petroglyphs. These remains extended down to the lowest sediment layer, which even contained many of the hammerstones that had been used to create some of the cupules. But this evidence, of the same antiquity as the rock art, came from the pre-Acheulian, Mode 1 occupation deposit, comprising an Oldowan-like cobble-tool technocomplex. That layer was overlain by substantial Acheulian deposits, mirroring the stratigraphy in Auditorium Cave. The petroglyphs at both sites therefore are attributable to the earliest stone tool tradition known in India (Fig. 8).

The Indian Upper Palaeolithic has yielded an engraved ostrich eggshell fragment from Patne, about 25,000 years old (Fig. 9), and three beads of the same material, from Bhimbetka and Patne. The grooves found on several animal teeth from Billa Surgam III, one of the Kurnool Caves, seem to have been intended to facilitate their attachment to strings. Attempts to attribute Indian rock paintings to the Pleistocene are, however, universally rejected today. In Afghanistan, at the site Aq Kupruk, two pre-Neolithic decorated stone objects have been suggested to be in the order of 10,000 years old (Marshack 1972), and a fossil shark tooth from the Levallois Mousterian of Darra-i-kur has been reported to be modified (Dupree 1972).



Fig. 8. Lower Palaeolithic cupules at Daraki-Chattan Cave, central India.

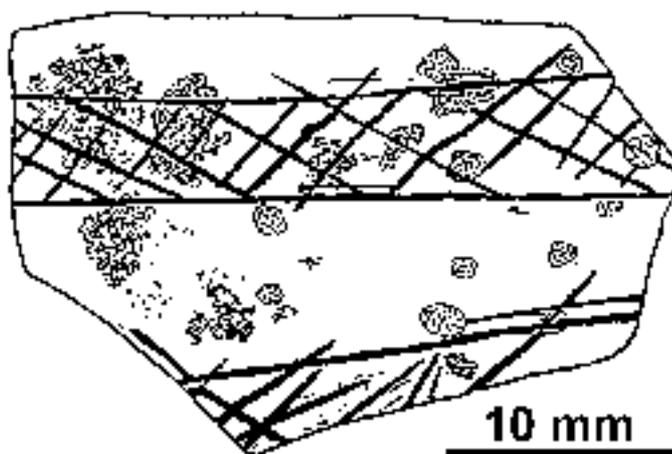


Fig. 9. Engraved ostrich eggshell fragment from Patne, India.

Levant

This region has produced one of the two oldest known protofigurines, the naturally shaped but extensively modified scoria pebble from the Acheulian of Berekhat Ram in Israel (Goren-Inbar 1986). It is of the Middle Pleistocene and more than 233,000 years old (Fig. 10). Goren-Inbar (1990) has also reported a chert artefact from the Mousterian of Quneitra with apparent markings, and probable disc beads of the Acheulian of Geshert Benot Ya'akov (Goren-Inbar *et al.* 1991). The incised bones of Kebara Cave are also of the Mousterian (Davis 1974). The Upper Palaeolithic of the region has provided several palaeoart finds, even some linear engravings in caves of Mount Carmel have been suggested to be of such age (Ronen and Barton 1981). More reliable evidence are portable finds, such as those excavated in Hayonim Cave. They comprise an engraved bone fragment, perforated animal teeth, and a limestone slab that is engraved on both sides (Belfer-Cohen and Bar-Yosef 1981). Another limestone cobble, from Urkan-e-Rub and dated to between c. 19,000 and 14,500 BP, bears complex geometric arrangements of engraved lines (Fig. 11). The

number of palaeoart objects from the region increases towards the end of the Pleistocene, particularly with the Natufian tradition. It has yielded figurines, beads, pendants and decorated sickle hafts from one of the Mt Carmel sites, the El-Wad Cave (Garrod and Bate 1937; Weinstein-Evron and Belfer-Cohen 1993). Other Natufian finds include pestles of presumed phallic shapes from some sites, including Kebara Cave (Turville-Petre 1932), which also produced an engraved limestone slab; a presumed sculpture from Ain Sakhri Cave (Neuville 1951); another stone figurine from Wadi Hammeh (Edwards 1991); and a long bone object decorated on both ends from Nahal Oren (Noy 1991).



Fig. 10. Engraved scoria pebble of the Acheulian, Berekhat Ram, Israel.

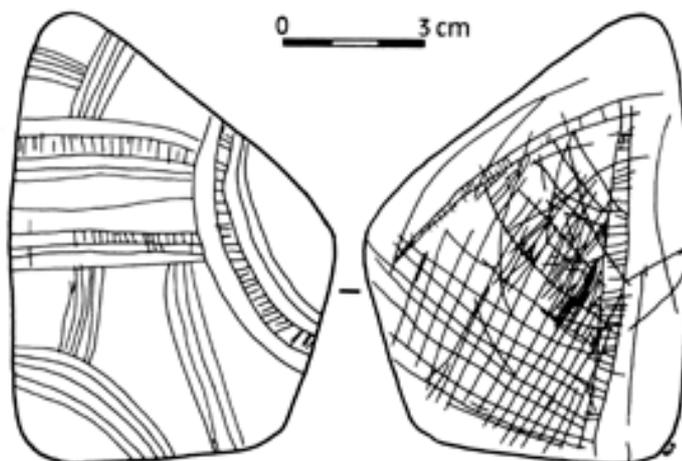


Fig. 11. Engraved limestone cobble, Urkan-e-Rub, Israel.

Summary

This survey of the known Pleistocene palaeoart of a continent that is well over four times the size of Europe illustrates the extreme paucity of such evidence. China, for instance, is about the same size as Europe and has been extensively occupied by hominins for at least two million years, yet its known early palaeoart is limited to one engraved object and some beads and pendants. We need to explain the incredible contrast with the thousands of rock art motifs and portable finds we have from Europe. Taphonomy alone is hardly an adequate explanation, research priorities and expectations are much more credible interpretations. The map showing the distribution of the known occurrences across Asia (Fig. 12) suggests that the two minor concentrations, in central Siberia and the Levant, coincide with regions that have witnessed concerted archaeological efforts, but this alone cannot account for the enormous disparity observed. The main limitation was perhaps imposed by the expectation that Ice Age art had to be of the kind reported from south-western Europe.

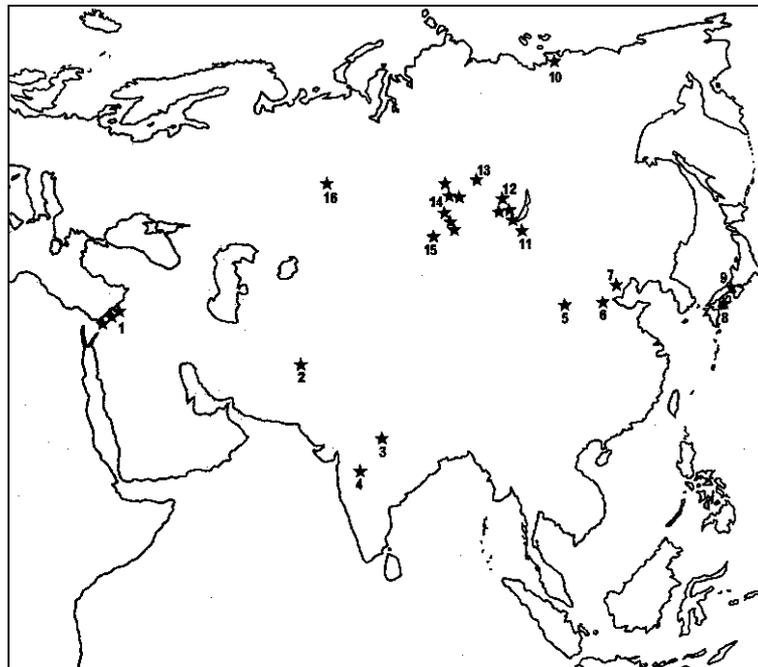


Fig. 12. Distribution of Pleistocene palaeoart finds in Asia.

This burdened researchers with an anticipation they found impossible to fulfil, because, very simply, the Franco-Cantabrian palaeoart body is not typical or representative: within the global corpus, it is exceptional; it is exotic. Judging from the evidence we have currently, that corpus is surprisingly uniform across the world, especially in its earliest expressions. The Asian material shows several distinctive similarities with that from Africa, and even with the Australian corpus. It is the cave art of France at Spain that is the oddity, the anomaly (Bednarik 1993a). Consequently the search for parallels was in all other continents doomed from the outset. It has also obscured the nature of the real body of global evidence until now. In most parts of the world, the search for Pleistocene art has therefore not even begun in earnest as yet. That is the only logical explanation for the evidence as it stands.

This is supported by the fact that, in the few regions where an informed search has been launched, such as certain parts of southern Africa and India, but especially in Australia, the quantity of surviving Pleistocene material is rather substantial. Perhaps it is time to completely refocus this search on the basis of realistic concepts of how the surviving global Pleistocene palaeoart presents itself. In the case of rock art, the criteria are simple. Such early rock art occurs in two forms: either in especially sheltered locations, such as limestone caves; or as deep petroglyphs on particularly weathering-resistant rock types. The oldest known examples are in places combining both variables: caves in very hard quartzite rock. Any rock art that does not meet one of these two characteristics is unlikely to be of the Ice Age.

In the case of mobiliary palaeoart, the preservational environment also determines the probability of such long survival. Objects of such materials as carbonate, bone, ivory or eggshell do not survive well in low-pH sediments, whereas haematite, steatite or ceramics may. Therefore most portable palaeoart finds come from loesses (Bednarik 2008) and limestone cave sediments. In short, taphonomy determines what can be found of the symbolic production of the Pleistocene.

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